

"The Gracious Gifts of God"
Baptism of Our Lord - January 9, 2022 - Luke 3:15-17, 21-22/C

In her devotional book, *Seasons of Your Heart*, Macrina Weiderkehr defines Epiphany as: "a manifestation of the Divine Presence right in the midst of daily life." So here we are on this Sunday after the Day of Epiphany - which you might have missed last Thursday, January 6, if you did **not** turn on your television or read the news that day - hopefully because you were marking the end of the 12 days of Christmas and the arrival of the Wise Ones from the east bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Sometimes, we get so caught up in our daily life that we miss the manifestation of the Divine Presence right in front of us.

That's why we need to hear again from the Prophet Isaiah, the one whose voice we've been hearing since the 1st Sunday of Advent - when echoes of Emmanuel (God with us) began - up until today. These powerful words speak to both our growth and to our struggles in the midst of daily life that might be far from what we would have thought our lives would be like right now. We may have counted on a better relationship, or a new position at work, or our first home, or child. We may have had plans to travel, to enjoy life with more time and more intention. And yet here we are again - watching the world we knew melt away, relationships dry up and the future more uncertain today than it was even a year ago.

And so Isaiah's words today are basic. They are even the theme for the first episode of The Chosen series about Jesus and his followers. (Once again, I want to encourage you to download the free app on your phone and start watching. There you will meet the Jesus you wish you'd always known, I promise!) The story begins as a little girl comes to her father late at night because she cannot sleep. Her father, looking up at the night sky, points out the brand new star above. She sighs. He asks her what is wrong. (She is afraid.)

Of what? says her father. (I don't know, she replies.)

What do we do when we're afraid? he prompts. (We say the words.)

Yes. **God's** words: "Thus says the Lord who created you, who formed you.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine."

This is the promise God has given us since ancient times: *I made you! Don't be afraid, I have saved you; I know your name, you belong to me. And because of that, the waters will not overwhelm you, and the fires will not consume you...Always remember I am with you.*

Today - on this 1st Sunday of **this** manifestation of God right in the middle of our daily lives - we go back to our beginnings as God's people. We remember not only our own baptisms, but the day that Jesus stepped onto the public stage after 18 years of private life in Nazareth. On that day he visited his cousin, John, known as the Baptizer, as he was ministering to his flock out in the wilderness - reminding them to Repent and Prepare - and baptizing them in the River Jordan. It was a critical event in the life of Jesus, and a turning point in John's life and ours as well.

On this day (that we mark in our Church Year as The Baptism of Our Lord,) we are privileged to welcome another youngster into the Body of Christ through the waters of Baptism, one of our two sacraments - Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Both rituals are known as "means of grace" or (in regular language) something that is sort of a "love letter"

to us from God - a gift from someone who cares, who has always known us and who cares about us more than even we can imagine. Sometimes, just the simple knowledge of that kind of gift, can change who we are. But even more than that, it can change how we live. Especially in the way Luke tells the story of Jesus's baptism, we get a very clear picture of what makes a Sacrament a sacrament. In short: a sacrament is not something **we** do for God; a sacrament is something **God does** for us. So, *why did Jesus need to be Baptized?* Part of the Answer is: Jesus didn't do it for God; **God** did it for Jesus.

You see, even for Jesus, Baptism was a gift from God. If you noted in the gospel reading, John does not actually baptize Jesus - nor even speak to him - the action is completely under the direction of the Holy Spirit (consistent with Luke's themes.) When *"all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened..."* Jesus was already in conversation with the Almighty through prayer. For him, it must have been like coming home - reuniting with The Holy Spirit who descended upon him like a dove, and then the voice of His Father surrounded him with amazing words of affirmation we all wish we heard not just from our parents, but from other important people in our lives. Something like: *"You honor me with your life; you are loved to the moon and back; I couldn't be more proud of you."*

During the 7 weeks of the Season of Epiphany, we will explore how Jesus embodies and reveals the essence of God to us... how the heavens were opened not to amaze **us** - but for God to embrace his Son - the God who will do whatever it takes to be among us - to BE us! Jesus' "new life" was beginning, as the One who would bring about an historic transformation from the old age to the new age: the divine presence in the midst of our daily life.

Even John the Baptist was a human being. And though he was also born via divine intervention, just as Jesus was, John was created for the purpose of preparing people to hear, to see and to receive the one who was to come. In vs 16-20 he portrays that one with the popular expectations for the Messiah: A man of strength and power, a man of whom we are not worthy, a bringer of the Holy Spirit who would gather in the harvest and judge it as good, healthy grain or something to be destroyed in unquenchable fire.

But then, John's eye caught Jesus in the crowd, and even for the miracle boy named John the Baptizer - nothing would ever be the same. For this is the point at which Jesus becomes publicly identified with something well beyond what the people had known before - a different understanding of God- a way of life that was all brand new. Folks had been waiting generations for this - for this One - this One they called the Anointed One: Messiah.

"What do you remember about your child's baptism day?" is a question I ask of parents. Was it the amazing experience of seeing the Holy Spirit planted in your child so their faith will grow over their whole lives? Was it seeing God claiming your child forever in love? Not usually. The answers are usually more about *intangibles* like family, belonging, names, and joy. It's not the ritual washing, the candle or the anointing with oil - none of those *visible* signs are the first memories. It is mostly about the *invisible marks*, the ones that draw us together as the body of Christ - a fellowship of believers - "The Church."

And it is exactly these invisible marks for which the whole world yearns - those who do not believe, those who have stopped believing and those whose belief is a little ragged and worn. We hear that folks are done with churches. But I tell you, God will continue to

draw people together, because it is in the midst of God's people where the invisible gifts of God are offered, "*You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*"

Some things you just can't hold on to. They are fleeting, they are meaningless without their history, they are impossible to capture. But they linger deep within us, echoes of Emmanuel, God with us. We are the lucky ones who get to carry these gifts like light into the darkness. We get to make invisible marks, visible, through forgiveness, justice, mercy and love.

The life of faith is often difficult. These days, those who are committed to the Christ must learn to speak the language of Gifts into every human life and every circumstance. The winds of change are demanding that we respond as Jesus' followers by committing to lives lived for God and for others rather than for ourselves.

Jesus' ministry began when he came together with his crazy cousin John – the priest's kid who ran away to the desert to live the wilderness life – and whose commitment to the movement of the Holy Spirit began even before he was born. Through all of his wild-eyed passion and invitation to ***Repent, for time is short***, John knew his purpose. He knew his place, and he knew who he was not. He did what God had asked him to do, and then he stepped out of the spotlight, ceding to the power and purpose of God through his very own kin, Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Just as Jesus stepped *into* human flesh, stepped *into* the Jordan, stepped *into* his calling to restore and to heal, he also had to stop and let the winds of change propel him toward the ultimate reason for his life. Can we do the same? Can we stand up to that wind? Can we step into our own human story instead of just observing it? Can we go down into the deep and muddy waters of this world's needs even if they threaten to drown us? **Yes, we can.** Will we lose a piece of ourselves by doing so? **Yes, we will.** But, do we make this journey alone? **No, we do not.** (*pause*)

Did you know there is only one place in all of Scripture where God says directly to us "I love you?" It's true; we heard it from Isaiah. So listen again to the prophet speak as an explanation of why God is with us, why God protects us and why God wants to be with us: "*Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*" Precious Children. Honored by God. And loved. Take that home with you today and begin to imagine how it would feel to hear that – to *really* hear that for the first time. It might be an epiphany - God's presence in the midst of daily life - or simply what we call gospel: good news. I'd say, that's more than Good News. It's a gift from God. Amen.

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